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## ABSTRACT

A study analyzed the discourse in a variety of Hong Kong newspapers to assess how an individual takes on the role of reader in relation to the rather complex public discourse of a daily newspaper, particularly in a multicultural, politically charged context. Four categories of newspaper (Hong Kong English, Hong Kong Chinese, non-Hong Kong Chinese, international) and their characteristics of format and distribution, particularly as they relate to the point of sale, are outlined. The writing styles and news values of a single story are examined across publications for evidence that a particular buyer/reader is implied in them. It is concluded that while each of the variety of formats and styles is significant for some aspect of the social construction of the identities of the newsmakers, journalists, and readers, there is no single configuration that can be associated with any particular linguistic, cultural, geographical, or ideological position. It is further suggested that an essential aspect of the Hong Kong newspaper reader is that he be considered neither Chinese nor foreign, neither at home nor away, neither insider nor outsider to international public discourse, but be adept at taking on and casting off multiple discourse-specific identities. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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Ron Scollon

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## Indexing the Implied Reader of the Hong Kong Newspaper<sup>1</sup>

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Paper presented at the Annual Meetings of the AAAL, Chicago  
March 25, 1996

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### ABSTRACT

Reader theories of interpretation have emphasized that the meaning of texts can at best be thought of as potential. This study of Hong Kong Newspaper discourse focuses upon the question of how a person takes on the role of reader in a text complex such as is represented by the daily newspaper. As part of larger study of the discursive influences in the social construction of the person in a politically charged transitional situation, this study argues that there is, in fact, no single configuration which can be associated with any particular linguistic (Chinese or English), cultural (Asian or western), geographical (South China), or ideological (socialist or capitalist) position. Further, there is no culturally naturalized person who could correspond to the reader implied in the general discourse of the Hong Kong daily newspapers. What appears to be essential in the identity of this reader is that he or she be adept at taking on (and casting off) multiple discourse-specific identities. As participants in a discourse (rather than implied readers of a particular newspaper) what is essential is the flexibility to move with ease through different points of view in this discourse. This study suggests that the multiplicity of newspapers in Hong Kong does not represent the presence of as many separate political or ideological factions so much as the necessity of the maintenance of multiple points of view for the ongoing construction and maintenance of the pluralistic Hong Kong reader.

### The implied reader

Reader theories of interpretation have emphasised that the meaning of texts can at best be thought of as potential. While Chatman's (1978) notion of the implied reader suggests that any text will place some constraints upon who can be expected to read it, this is far from saying that the text MUST have such a reader or that it MUST have the interpretation that such a reader would bring to the text. It is perhaps becoming commonplace to note that any reader's interpretation of a text will arise out of that reader's particular circumstances of social, historical, and ideological placement as they interact with the text itself. As Rofel (1994) notes, text or authorship-based analyses are incapable of highlighting the workings of cultural power. Such studies

assume a single spectator position while ignoring the manner in which actual audiences interpret what they watch.... Popular culture studies that challenge the exclusive emphasis upon the text celebrate knowledgeable spectators who subvert, poach upon, and rework popular texts to make their 'own' meanings and put them to their 'own' uses.... These ethnographic endeavors remind us that we still need to concern ourselves with the relation between historical subjects in the world and the imagined positions set out for these subjects in popular discourse (1994:702)

Nevertheless, as Livingstone (1992) has pointed out for media studies in general, one might distinguish among a majority reading, an ideological normative reading, and an oppositional reading.

My purpose in this study is not, however, to focus directly upon questions of interpretation nor the positioning of potential readers in relationship to interpretations of particular texts. My concern is

with the logically prior, though perhaps not so often studied, problem of seeing how a person takes on the role of reader at all in relationship to a rather complex though common discourse, daily newspaper discourse.

The public discourse of Hong Kong newspapers seems a likely source of concepts of voice and identity for those who participate in this discourse as readers. Bakhtin (1981) has argued that the languages and the discourses in which one participates are widespread and mutual influences in the process of learning one's way into new languages and new discourses. For Hong Kong bilinguals the broad theatre of discourse within which communicative identities and voices are learned, practised, and evolved over time and with experience remains the major influence upon the ways in which these bilinguals claim and express their identities and voices, even when that is done just in English (S. Scollon 1995). Said more simply, speakers and writers of English are likely to be influenced by Chinese if they use Chinese actively in their day-to-day lives.

The most distinguishing general characteristic of daily newspapers in Hong Kong is their numbers. There are many different papers on the one hand, and there are many readers on the other. Most readers are multiple readers; that is to say, they read more than a single newspaper. Furthermore, these papers are sold widely and at many locations throughout Hong Kong. One never has to go far to find a newspaper for sale, though farther for an English paper than a Chinese one. As a theatre of discourse, therefore, it can be said to be highly active with its stages relatively evenly distributed throughout the speech community.

A newspaper is far from a text; it is a complex of texts, drawings, photographs, and other displays among which readers must sort their way before more focused reading can begin. The generic and textual complexity of the single newspaper is compounded by the need to select among a large number of available newspapers. In such a complex discourse, it is rather difficult to maintain any simple notion of an implied reader for any particular text. It is only at the level of the larger theatre of discourse within which stories and newspapers act out their positions that a certain set of implications regarding the receptive participants of the discourse emerge. While my data do not support a single implied reader of any particular newspaper, I believe it can be argued that there is an implied participant in the general discourse. In Hong Kong the participant so implied is a reader of multiple newspapers who sees himself or herself as living in a state of being permanently elsewhere; this is the condition which I call 'at home overseas'.

### **The Theatre of Discourse**

This study takes as its theatre of discourse the public discourse of Hong Kong newspapers. The plenitude and variety of newspapers published in Hong Kong--well in excess of 2.8 million daily copies in a community of 6 million people (Phillips 1993)<sup>2</sup>--indicates a central placement of this form of discourse in the Hong Kong speech community (Fong 1992) analogous, perhaps, to the centrality of the television talk show for North Americans (Carbaugh 1989, 1990). These 2.8 million copies are distributed across some 26 full dailies, three of them in English. In addition there are another two dozen specialist newspapers featuring subjects such as horse racing or entertainment. The generic variety of the texts (Bell 1991, Bhatia 1993) which are found in a daily newspaper ranges from the sometimes tightly crafted prose of editorials and literary features, to the chatty vernacular of the people and entertainment sections. Also, the public accessibility through wide distribution and low cost of the newspapers throughout the speech community suggest wide demographic saturation of this form of public discourse.

The stages upon which these newspapers are sold are the ubiquitous news-stands. This is where the majority of Hong Kong newspaper readers enter into the discourse; that is, this is where they buy their papers. The ethnographic study of that stage shows several rather interesting differences among four categories of newspapers commonly found in Hong Kong: Hong Kong English, Hong Kong Chinese, non-Hong Kong Chinese, and international newspapers. These are listed in tabular form below:

Hong Kong English

ease of purchase  
 non-verbal transaction  
 buyer oriented  
 'telephonic' channel  
 front page news  
 choice  
 negotiation  
 competitive

Hong Kong Chinese

speed of purchase  
 verbal transaction  
 seller oriented  
 'intercom' channel  
 front page adverts  
 custom  
 ratification  
 alternative

Hong Kong (English & Chinese)

complex layout  
 low type/token ratio  
 anonymous reporter

International

simple page numbering  
 high type/token ratio  
 by-lined reporter

The three Hong Kong English newspapers are displayed at the point of sale as if the main point were to assist the buyer in deciding which paper to buy. They are arrayed with the upper half of the front page upwards. This facilitates the ease of sale for the buyer. In this the newspaper is treated like a 'telephonic' channel of communication. That is to say, the display suggests a preliminary routine of selection or choice which with the newspaper consists of examination and determination whether or not the buyer wishes to buy this particular paper on this particular occasion. The front page layout of the paper further establishes this channel definition by placing there the highest valued stories which the paper has to present to the potential buyer and reader. What is emphasised is choice, negotiation and competition among the newspapers displayed for sale. Each paper puts its best foot forward asking the buyer and reader to choose it on this occasion. Once a paper is selected, the transaction can be completed without any speech acts on the part of either the buyer or the seller.

It should be remembered that this is the *as if* layout of the stage. Many purchasers do not go through these potential steps of choice and decision making, but should they wish to do so, the stage is presented so as to facilitate this process.

Chinese Hong Kong newspapers present a rather different aspect at the point of sale. There it appears that the layout encourages a quick sale without any need for deliberation. Because there are so many of them from which to select, the newspapers are laid out in a shingled pattern with just the masthead visible and these are normally oriented toward the seller, not the buyer. The layout is organised for the seller's convenience, not the buyer's convenience. As a channel of communication this stage resembles the intercom more than the telephone; it is assumed that a particular buyer and reader will know just which newspaper he or she will want to buy and not require either persuasion on the part of the newspaper or reflection on the part of the buyer.

As part of this aspect of prior selection, the front pages of Hong Kong Chinese newspapers are full-page advertisements<sup>3</sup>, not key stories or a menu of news stories to be found within. This layout tends to foster custom, the ratification of previously agreed decisions, and to provide not competition among the newspapers, but a wide range of alternatives for the buyer who already knows the voices of the papers. Finally, smooth functioning of the purchase transaction requires the use of a few syllables of Chinese, the names of papers.

Again, it should be noted that this is the *as if* layout of the stage. It is possible, though awkward, to buy newspapers without speaking Chinese. It is much more difficult, however, to look over the contents of a newspaper before making a purchase.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the English newspaper portion of the stage assumes deliberation but can accept rapid, customary transaction, the Chinese portion of the stage assumes rapid, customary transaction and deliberation is difficult.

In spite of these clear differences in the structure of the stage or the point of sale, within the newspapers themselves there are perhaps more likenesses among the Hong Kong newspapers, Chinese and English, and differences between them and the international newspapers (*USA Today*, *International*

*Herald Tribune, Asian Wall Street Journal*). The Hong Kong newspapers show greater complexity of layout and formatting than the international papers. Page and section numbering are particularly more complex in the Hong Kong papers, especially in the Chinese papers than in the international ones where straightforward consecutive page numbering dominates.

Finally, while one can distinguish between Chinese language and English language newspapers, there is no 'Chinese' newspaper from the point of view of styles, news values, or formatting and layout which could be contrasted to any 'English' newspaper. Li (1994) notes that the very widespread use of code-mixing, especially in feature writing in Hong Kong Chinese newspapers makes it difficult to draw even a clear linguistic distinction between newspapers on the basis of language. This code-mixing involves not only English and Chinese but perhaps more significantly, mixing between vernacular Cantonese and Standard Written Chinese.

In a study of fourteen versions of 'the same' news story--a meeting between Chinese Premier Li Peng and former US president George Bush--it was found that while there were two contrasting story structures, the standard inverted pyramid of western journalism and the traditional Chinese four-part *qi cheng zhuan he*, these contrasted structures did not match a contrast in language, political ideology, or regional source. That is to say, the inverted pyramid was found in both English language and Chinese language newspapers and the *qi cheng zhuan he* structure was found in both languages (Scollon and Scollon to appear). Similarly, the point of view and the use of non-objective or evaluative verbs of saying--'claimed', 'criticised' as opposed to the neutral 'say'--was distributed in a way that did not distinguish between papers of different ideological, cultural, or regional provenience.

Even within the Chinese language newspapers, differential orientation to Cantonese and Mandarin readings of Chinese characters is indicated in the choices made of romanization of the names of foreign newsmakers. For example, the Russian President Boris Yeltsin is romanized by Sing Pao, Tin Tin Yat Pao and others so that if it is pronounced in Mandarin it is *ye li qin* but in Cantonese *yihp leih yam*. Ming Pao, on the other hand, chooses characters which in Mandarin are pronounced *ye er xin* and in Cantonese *yeh yih san*. While such choices are complex decisions having to do not only with the newspaper's ideological position but with the sources from which news is received, there is no evidence that such choices are sufficient to determine any particular set or sub-set of Chinese language newspapers.

The daily newspapers of Hong Kong, Chinese and English, local, overseas, and international display a wide variety of formats and styles both on the external stage of the point of sale and on the internal stage of the linguistic and discourse structures as well as layout of pages. While each of these aspects of the theatre of discourse is significant for some aspect of the social construction of the identities of newsmakers, journalists, and readers, the result of this study is to conclude that there is no single configuration which can be associated with any particular linguistic, cultural, geographical, or ideological position.

### **The person: interactive, pluralistic identity**

The person implied as a buyer at the point of sale of a Hong Kong Chinese newspaper is a regular, ratified, customary purchaser of a particular newspaper, or more commonly a particular set of newspapers. The person implied as the buyer of a Hong Kong English paper or an international paper is, on the other hand, a decision maker who needs further information. He or she is also seen as wishing to make a choice among competing claims for his or her attention. The buyer of the Chinese paper is assumed also to be able to speak Chinese, especially Cantonese, but the buyer of the English paper may buy it without speaking and thus without displaying any linguistic identity.

The reader who has neither identity nor voice remains only implicit in the identity- and voice-making activities of newsmakers and journalists as the research on media audiences I cited in opening indicates. In Hong Kong, however, the reader maintains an identity independent of the one crafted for him or her by newsmaker and journalist by taking on and putting off these identities as he or she moves from newspaper to newspaper, topical compartment to compartment, or from feature to feature. Unlike the typical reader in the United States, the United Kingdom or Europe where there are often strong



loyalties to particular newspapers with characteristic class or other ideological positions (Evans 1976, Bell 1991), whatever identity we may ascribe to the reader in Hong Kong, this identity must be understood as flexible, variable, situational, and volitional. That is to say, what we do not find is any culturally naturalised person who could correspond to the reader implied in the general discourse of the Hong Kong daily newspapers.

This latter point raises the question of why international news is found in Hong Kong newspapers at all if there is, in fact, no Hong Kong reader which can be assumed to fit the recipient design characteristics of such a reader. From the beginning of the modern newspaper in Europe and elsewhere, there were two fundamental sources of news, foreign news and local news. For the English, foreign news was, on the whole, continental news; home news was news of England. In post-Colonial America, foreign news was that of England and the continent; home news was news of the newly established United States.

Hong Kong, on the other hand, has had an ambivalent existence. As Frank Ching has recently pointed out,

For the English language newspaper press home was about England, for the Chinese language newspapers it was about China. For the vast majority of the inhabitants, Hong Kong was not home (*South China Morning Post*, Saturday, January 8, 1994, *The Review*:3).<sup>5</sup>

Hong Kong for most of its history has been international news, even for the British and the Chinese who have lived in Hong Kong; it has been the news of 'overseas Chinese' from the Chinese point of view and the news of one of the British colonies from the British point of view. In this context, 'international news' must be understood to be fundamentally ambiguous and displacing for the Hong Kong reader. It might mean either news from outside of China (including Hong Kong) or news from outside of England (including Hong Kong). A Hong Kong reader reading in Hong Kong, then, might well read of Hong Kong from an outsider point of view more often or more easily than from that of an insider. On the other hand, what is seen as 'international' and outside of Hong Kong as well might most often have been seen from a dual and equally ambiguous point of view, one view Chinese and another view British.

To turn my question around I might ask not why is international news found in the Hong Kong public discourse, so much as when did Hong Kong become separated from international news in Hong Kong public discourse? For my purposes the answer to this question is that for the Hong Kong reader, it appears to be an essential aspect of his or her identity as a newspaper reader and has been for the period during which the modern newspaper has existed that he or she be considered neither Chinese nor foreign, neither at home nor away, neither an insider nor an outsider to international public discourse. What appears to be essential in the identity of this reader is that he or she be adept at taking on (and casting off) multiple discourse-specific identities. I believe that the implied Hong Kong participant in this theatre of discourse is not the implied reader of any particular newspaper nor of any particular feature or category found within them. What is most characteristic of this reader is the flexibility to move with ease through different points of view in this discourse. I suggest that the multiplicity of newspapers in Hong Kong does not represent the presence of as many separate political or ideological factions so much as the necessity of the maintenance of multiple points of view for the ongoing construction and maintenance of the pluralistic Hong Kong reader.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The research upon which this paper is based was conducted at City University of Hong Kong in part under a grant from the University Grants Committee (Hong Kong) "Changing Patterns of Genre and Identity in Hong Kong Public Discourse". I would like to thank Vijay Bhatia, David Chor Shing Li, and Vicki Yung and for ongoing discussions, for reading drafts, and for their comments. Janice Ho Wing Yan and Ivy Wong Kwok Ngan, my primary research assistants were also helpful in both data collection and analysis. Suzie Scollon has contributed substantially in providing a continuing critical reflection on this work both at the stage of the construction of the data and in this analysis. While my analysis owes much to these institutions and people, none of them is responsible for the problems which remain.

<sup>2</sup> Exact circulation figures are, of course, difficult to determine. Newspaper and other periodical publishers have a motive to exaggerate these figures to attract larger advertising rates (Media 1993; Hollis 1994). Nevertheless, the figures given are somewhat standardised as they are published in an international and highly competitive industry journal which is likely to reduce the worst excesses of local competitive exaggeration. To give an idea of the very wide range of claims, Phillips (1993) gives the circulation of *Oriental Daily News* as 600,000. Li (1993) quoting SRH 1992, which I have not confirmed) gives a circulation for 1992 of 1,781,000. A recently published comparative set of figures sets Hong Kong well above any other country listed at approximately three newspapers for every five people as indicated below (The Economist 1993 as cited in the South China Morning Post:

Daily newspapers per 1,000 people 1988-1990

United States	250
Switzerland	463
Germany	390
Japan	587
Canada	228
Hong Kong	632
France	210
Sweden	533
Italy	107
Australia	249
Britain	395
New Zealand	324
Israel	261
Spain	82
Bahamas	138
South Korea	280
Mexico	127
Russia	400*
Hungary	261
Brazil	54
China	30*
India	28

\*estimated

I use the relatively conservative figures in Phillips (1993) as my basis in this report.

<sup>3</sup> Since September of 1995 there has been a significant drop in the number of front page advertisements in Hong Kong Chinese newspapers. This may be either a result of the drop in the real estate market whose advertisers are among the few large companies willing to pay the \$300,000 such an

advertisement costs or a result of the current newspaper price war. So far neither of these developments appear to have significantly altered the overall pattern of sale of Chinese newspapers on Hong Kong news-stands.

<sup>4</sup> While most news-stand purchasers I have observed have been men, I have observed a Chinese woman approach a neighbourhood news-stand in Mongkok, pick up a paper, look it over for a few minutes, and refolding it, place it back on the news-stand and walk away. This woman's behaviour is much like that seen regarding English or foreign newspapers at the Star Ferry Terminal stands. I have also observed a group of three or four women looking through Chinese newspapers on sale at a supermarket where no newsseller is in attendance--the papers are displayed on an open rack. On the whole, however, this pre-purchase reading appears to be quite exceptional behaviour. The newspaper, the *Sing Tao Wan Pao*, like the several other evening papers, has not otherwise been considered in this study. It is may be significant that these evening newspapers do not advertise on their front covers. As a result they may be scanned for news before purchase.

<sup>5</sup> This quotation is cited in the *South China Morning Post* as follows: To be published January 17: Frank Ching, *Return to the Heart of the Dragon*, Hong Kong: O & A Editions. It remains an open question whether or not Hong Kong is experienced as home for the majority of residents today.



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